

Nightshift

by Syl

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Summary: Police Cadet Dick Grayson learns that not all Bludhaven police officers wear tainted badges.

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Summary: Police Academy Cadet Dick Grayson experiences his first police patrol "ride-along". The ride proves dangerous as well as educational.

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Nightshift by Syl Francis

"To Serve and Protect." (Police Motto)

"Grayson!" The Police Academy Instructor barked my name. PAIs didn't yell or scream or shout. They barked!

"Sir!" Me, I more or less squeaked. I stood rigidly at attention as the PAI barked out my patrol assignment.

"You're assigned to patrol unit Lincoln Oscar Five."

"Yessir! Patrol Unit Lincoln Oscar Five!"

Tonight was my Academy class's first ride-along with real patrol units. We were riding in the capacity of observers only; as cadets in our fifth week of training, we still had no authority to make arrests or fire a weapon. (Or open our mouths, or drive the patrol car, or--well, you get the idea!)

The patrol officers that we'd be riding with were basically playing the role of babysitters for the night.

Our assignment was to keep our eyes and ears open and learn. We were required to write an after-action report on our experience, detailing what we saw, what we heard, and critiquing the actions taken by the officers on the scene. The report would probably never see the light of day beyond the PAIs nearest rubbish bin, I thought cynically.

My expectations for tonight were pretty low. I'd been in Bludhaven for almost a year now, and the corruption I'd seen in the BHPD was like a terminal cancer that had spread to all the major organs of the body. The corruption started at the top and rolled downhill from there.

Like something as equally unpleasant and smelly.

"Cadets . . . when I tell you to fall out, I want you to fall out and double-time it to your assigned patrol teams! FALL OUT!"

We all sprinted at top speed to our assigned vehicles.

The BHPD patrol cars were all parked in an almost precise military line immediately behind us. Each patrol team was standing at parade rest in front of its assigned vehicle. I hadn't known what to expect from the nightshift, but so far they sure *looked* impressive!

As I came to an abrupt halt in front of my team, I snapped to attention, and saluted smartly. The two officers also came to attention, mirroring my perfect military stance, and as one, they returned my salute.

Protocol required that the senior patrolman, in this case a sergeant, drop his salute first. He did so, then gave me a friendly smile and offered me his hand.

"Welcome, aboard, Cadet Grayson. I'm Sergeant Jennings and this is my partner, Officer Kelp. Don't worry about tonight's patrol, Cadet. Remember your training and your instructions. You are to ride-along only in the capacity of an observer. I think you'll find it educational."

Both Jennings and Kelp had nice friendly smiles. I was somewhat surprised. I'd been so used to the BHPD being crooked, that I guess I'd stopped thinking of it as being comprised of individual people. I'd even stopped looking at the individual officers' faces; instead,

I'd seen only tainted badges.

Maybe tonight *was* going to be educational after all.

The first call came in shortly after Jennings reported that we were active.

"All units within the vicinity of the Harbor Bridge access road. A possible Code Thirty in progress on the east side of the Bridge. The suspect, a white male in his mid-twenties to early thirties is armed. Shots have been fired. All units, respond Code Five."

The east side of the Bridge was in our assigned patrol area. Kelp wrote down the information in his shorthand, and acknowledged the radio call.

"This is Lincoln Oscar Five. ETA, two minutes, Out." Kelp's succinct response was standard operating police procedure. He'd reported that our unit was responding and that we were approximately two minutes away.

No sense reading back the information that the Dispatcher had given us and tying up the police net. Kelp flipped on the emergency lights and siren, and Jennings instantly brought the patrol car up to 60 mph.

"We have a Code Thirty, Cadet," Jennings said. "What do you advise that we do?"

I blinked. What happened to the part about keeping my mouth shut? I swallowed.

Kelp looked at me, grinning.

"Welcome to my nightmare, kid. When I was a rookie on my first patrol with the Sarge here, I got quizzed all night long. We've been partners for almost fifteen years, and he still quizzes me! It's like having Alex Trebeck for a partner!"

I nodded, only half-listening to Kelp; instead, I concentrated on the question at hand, and rapidly analyzed the information we'd been given.

A Code 30 was an attempted suicide. 'In progress at the east side of the Harbor Bridge' meant that the person, presumably a jumper, hadn't quite yet decided to take the final plunge into the cold waters of the polluted Gotham River over 250 feet below.

Furthermore, he was armed, and because he'd already fired his weapon, he was also exceptionally dangerous. He wasn't just a threat to himself as a possible suicide, he was a danger to innocent passersby as well. Code Five meant that we should respond with lights flashing, because the situation was an extreme emergency.

I reported my analysis of the situation to Jennings.

"Uh, possible suicide . . . probably can't quite make up his mind if the problem he thought was so impossible to face just two minutes ago is really such a big deal . . . now that he sees the Gotham River churning so far down below him."

My mind moved rapidly from one possible scenario to another.

"Um, since the jumper is armed, we should approach with caution. We should try to establish a rapport with him, like getting him to talk; try not to alarm him in any way. Um . . . "

There was more. There had to be more. I *knew* there was more. But what?

I suddenly felt like I was thirteen again, and Batman was quizzing me.

"Two heists committed at two a.m. on the second day of the second month," Batman intoned.

"Two-Face," I said, stating the obvious. "He hit the two five and dimes owned by Timothy and Thomas Dyad, twin brothers. I think the stores' name is 'Twice as Nice'."

Batman nodded. Then he asked me the *question*. He always did that to me. Just when I thought I knew what I was talking about, he always managed to make me realize that I'd missed something.

Usually something vital.

"Tell me, Robin, why would Two-Face bother to escape from Arkham Asylum just to hit a couple of two-bit five and dimes?"

Why indeed, I asked myself. I shrugged.

"I don't know," I admitted. "It seems like a big waste of time and resources. Unless--"

"Unless, what?" Batman asked. He was waiting for me to see what was in front of me.

"Unless, it's all some kind of diversion," I finished. I quickly scanned through the police blotter reports again.

Bingo!

"Here it is!" I said triumphantly. "At approximately the same time that someone was ripping off plastic noise makers from the five and dime stores, someone broke into the Gotham City Mint and made off with a rare collection of Double Eagles. To include one that has two heads stamped on it by mistake, making it the rarest coin in the collection! Worth over--" I stopped and looked at Batman.

"Worth over two million dollars," he said nodding.

"He's armed," I continued. "Uh, I said that. Hmm, that makes him dangerous, therefore . . . "

I wasn't given a chance to finish my assessment, because we were suddenly there. We pulled up lights flashing. Traffic was backed up

for miles. Another unit that had arrived just seconds before us was already setting up barricades and trying to untangle and reroute the traffic.

As the immediate superior officer on the scene, Sergeant Jennings took charge. He ran to the back of the patrol car and pulled three Kevlar vests, a bullhorn, and a shotgun.

We each took a vest and put it on; Jennings then tossed the shotgun to Kelp.

"Remember, Cadet. This is a *possible* suicide; however, he's definitely armed and he's fired his weapon. He must be considered dangerous!"

As if to confirm Jennings statement, we suddenly heard the distinctive sounds of a semiautomatic Beretta Model 92 9mm handgun being fired in quick succession. All those lessons on firearms in the Batcave were suddenly coming in handy.

Don't get me wrong. Bruce did not approve of guns, nor was he happy with the fact that as a police officer I was going to carry one. You see, when Bruce was only six, an unknown gunman killed his parents. Right in front of him.

Believe me, Bruce hated guns and everything they represented. He trained me since childhood on their proper handling, because he wanted to prepare me for the devastation that guns in the wrong hands could wreak. As my first object lesson on gun safety, Bruce showed me the crime scene photos of the aftermath of a gangland shooting.

I must've had nightmares for weeks afterwards.

But the lessons paid off. Today, I could recognize the sounds of more than one hundred different types of small arms fire, and could accurately shoot most hand and shoulder-held weapons. A lot of good that was doing me now, since I wasn't authorized to carry a weapon. Not that I was one hundred percent sure that I was capable of aiming it at a fellow human being and actually pulling the trigger!

And Bruce, with his personal aversion to guns . . . could I face him again if I were ever forced to shoot a suspect? That was a hurdle I still had to cross.

While these thoughts flashed through my mind, we were busy diving behind the police cruiser and taking cover. A couple of rounds ricocheted off the pavement about five feet in front of us. I looked at Jennings and nodded ruefully.

"Definitely dangerous," I agreed.

I suddenly felt a consuming need to do something! I wanted to chuck the police cadet's uniform and take the guy down as Nightwing. This whole enterprise of joining the police department and trying to bring down its corruption from the inside was beginning to seem like such a huge mistake!

I could be up there now, disarming the guy, ensuring his safety, and the safety of others. Instead, here I was, taking cover behind a police cruiser and pretending that I was greener than grass.

The uniform suddenly felt like a straight jacket, tying my hands behind my back.

No! I'd taken an oath, and as long as I was in uniform, I would think and react just like the rest of the men and women in blue who didn't have the option of becoming a vigilante in their spare time.

Jennings quickly set up an emergency command post right on the side of our police cruiser. I blinked. I was already beginning to think of Lincoln Oscar Five as **our** police cruiser! He rolled out a map of Bludhaven and held down the corners with the bullhorn, a cell phone, and his hat.

"Lincoln Oscar Nine!" Jennings barked. I noticed that Jennings barked out his orders, too. And his bark was right up there with my PAIs.

"Yo, Sarge!" An officer with Corporal stripes on his sleeves came running up at a low crouch. I could easily read the officer's nametag in the bright bridge lights--Roberts.

"Robby, take a couple of guys and stop traffic coming in from the west side." Jennings pointed at the map in a general east-west corridor on the bridge.

"Clear what's on the bridge now, but don't allow any more to come beyond this mark." Jennings pointed at the center of Harbor Bridge.

Roberts nodded. He pointed at two men and they moved out immediately.

I wondered about the westbound traffic, that is, the traffic leaving the city.

"Westbound traffic should be safe to keep moving," Jennings explained as if reading my mind. "The first units that arrived on the scene immediately began routing it to the farthest lane."

I looked over to the westbound lanes. Sure enough, traffic was already moving fairly smoothly, even though they were reduced to a single lane. The BHPD was proving to be equally as effective as the GCPD.

Jennings called Kelp over.

"Kelp, take the snipers and set them up here and here." Jennings pointed at two strategic locations on the bridge's suspension cables that would give the police snipers a clear shot at the jumper.

"Do not fire under any circumstances unless I give the order. Understand?"

"Got it," Kelp replied.

"The TV news guys would have a field day if we shot a guy trying to commit suicide!" Jennings said. "Then, in the process, they'd conveniently fail to report that the psycho was armed and dangerous!"

Kelp looked at me, a grimace on his usually pleasant features.

"The BHPD and the local news media don't exactly have a friendly professional relationship," he explained bitterly. "They think we're all corrupt, and we think they're all a bunch of incompetent ass--"

"Hey, partner, never mind all that," Jennings interrupted. "Position the snipers and wait for my word."

Kelp nodded curtly and dashed off to carry out his orders. My eyes followed him as he and the two police snipers moved stealthily amongst the parked vehicles, utilizing classic escape and evasion maneuvers.

I felt oddly guilty by Kelp's words.

I was one of those who'd painted all of the members of the BHPD with the same paintbrush of corruption. I was finally beginning to realize that an organization was made up of individuals. It was not just a faceless crowd without a conscience.

Each of these men and women risked their lives day in and day out, and for what? For people like me to presume them to be guilty until proven innocent.

Hadn't Batman taught me better than that?

Jennings' cell phone rang. He immediately flipped it open. I noticed that it was blinking in random patterns of red and green lights. A scrambler device, probably.

"Jennings," he said tersely. "Has the Harbor Patrol deployed yet? Good. What's their ETA? Five minutes?! This idiot could jump in the next second!"

Jennings paused, listening.

"Well, tell 'em to *floor* it! Stephens, I don't *care* about moontides or riptides or any other kind of tide! Tell 'em to get their--"

He paused again.

"Okay! Okay! Just get 'em here!" Jennings said exasperatedly. "Did you at least get the police psychologist?"

It was SOP to call in an on-duty police psychologist in cases involving possible suicides.

"What?! Well, dispatch a unit and get her *butt* down here ASAP!"

Jennings paused to listen.

"That's *your* problem, Stephens! My job is to secure the area and make sure that none of these idiot looky-looks get their heads blown off!"

Jennings looked like he was about to have a stroke; he'd turned a decided shade of purple, which had me suddenly reviewing my CPR training. Boy, I sure wouldn't want to be this Stephens person just about now.

"Sweet Mother of Jesus!" he yelled. "I have eight units that responded to the call, and I've already deployed them all!"

Jennings was shaking his head and waving his free arm for added emphasis.

"I don't *have* anyone to run down and pick up the doctor!" He suddenly caught sight of me, crouching there next to him looking totally useless. He gave me a smile. Funny, his smile suddenly looked almost as menacing as Batman's scowl.

Uh-oh, I thought.

"Stephens, don't worry about it. I've got it. No problem."

Jennings hung up and held the phone at arms-length momentarily, eyeing it with a look of mild distaste.

"Incompetent jerk," he muttered under his breath.

"Cadet Grayson!" I looked at him. Why did I suddenly feel like a deer caught in headlights?

"Grayson, I need you to run an errand for me. Apparently, the on-duty psychologist has suddenly developed car trouble."

He indicated at a point on the map.

"Her car's broken down at the corner of Melville and Thirty-fourth. That's about twelve miles east of here."

In a nasty part of town, I thought. Considering that we were in Bludhaven, that was nasty indeed!

Jennings started folding up his map and stuffing it into his shirt.

"Kid, I'm gonna make you a hero on your first ride-along. I can't spare any of the officers on the site, so as the Officer in Charge, I'm volunteering you to play shuttle bus for the good doctor."

He gave me that stomach-chilling smile again.

"Think you can handle her?" he asked, jerking his head in the direction of the cruiser.

It took me a moment to realize that by *her* he meant our patrol car.

"You mean, drive the cruiser? Really? With lights flashing and everything?" I felt like I was sixteen again, and Batman had finally given me the keys to the Batmobile . . .

"Happy Sixteenth Birthday, Robin!" Batman said, tossing me the keys to the Batmobile. I caught them easily, then just stood there admiring the car's sleek finish. Her body bespoke of the tremendous power hidden underneath.

I couldn't believe it! This was the moment I'd dreamt of since I first became Robin!

I climbed behind the steering wheel and took a minute to get used to the feel of her. My hands were actually shaking! I adjusted the seat, rear and side view mirrors, then moved the steering wheel until I felt comfortable.

I looked at Batman and gave him a thumbs up.

"Ready, Batman," I said eagerly.

"Try to keep her from achieving take-off velocity--" Batman began.

His words were drowned out by the zero-to-ninety screech of tires and super turbo-charged engines. We were both instantly thrown back in our seats!

Woo-hoo! What a *rush*!

"Yup, with lights flashing and everything," Jennings said. This time his smile was genuine. He tossed me the keys, and I caught them easily, experiencing a momentary feeling of *deja vu*.

"Take care of her, Cadet," he said solemnly.

"Yes, Sir!" I said nodding eagerly, the full import of the honor he'd just bestowed on me sinking in.

I drove through the busy, late-evening Bludhaven streets, lights flashing and siren blaring. Traffic pulled to the side for me making me feel like I was the King of the Road.

Those who didn't pull over fast enough felt the whoosh of displaced air as I swerved sharply around them, narrowly missing them. I could've easily avoided them, of course, but buzzing them was a lot more fun.

"Yah-hoo!" I hollered like some kid out on a joyride. I still can't explain the feeling. I mean, I'd driven the Batmobile, probably the coolest set of wheels on the whole planet. The adrenaline rush from sitting in that particular driver's seat can't be beaten!

But, man, this was a *police cruiser*! I don't know. Maybe it's a guy thing, but . . . WOW! . . . I was driving a *real* police car!

And what a car! Not like those clunky boxcars the GCPD drove, but a super turbo-charged sports job. It rode low on the road and had a wide wheelbase, which made maneuvering through the streets of Bludhaven seem almost like an act of sheer ecstasy!

I gunned her V-8 engine up to 90 mph. She smoothly transitioned to the higher rpms without so much as a hesitation.

I was in love.

As I approached the corner of Melville and 34th Street, a call came over the radio.

"All units within the vicinity of Melville and Thirty-fourth Street, we have a Code Twenty-one. Repeat. All units within the vicinity of Melville and Thirty-fourth Street, we have a Code Twenty-one. Acknowledge."

Several units acknowledged at once.

I was about to respond when another call came in following on the heels of the Code Twenty-one.

"Lincoln Oscar Five, you have a Code Eighteen. Cancel your Code Forty. Repeat, you have a Code Eighteen. Cancel your Code Forty. Lincoln Oscar Five, acknowledge."

I didn't respond.

The dispatcher paused for a few seconds, then began calling again.

"All units. Be on the lookout for Lincoln Oscar Five. Last reported heading in the direction of Melville and Thirty-fourth Street. Lincoln Oscar Five does not acknowledge."

Again, a flurry of responses could be heard as patrol units quickly called in their acknowledgements.

I immediately shut off the cruiser's lights and siren. A Code 40 was a special detail. In this case, my Code 40 was picking up the police psychologist. A Code 18 meant "return to station." Apparently, my Code 40 had been cancelled, and I was being ordered to return to station.

The reason for this reversal of instructions was probably the Code 21 that the Dispatcher had just reported in the vicinity of Melville and 34th Street, the same location where I was supposed to pick up the psychologist.

A Code 21 was the call that no police officer wanted to hear, and which usually brought the swiftest response: Officer needs help! Since I was only a cadet, the night supervisor probably didn't want me to go into a dangerous situation alone. Hence, I was being called back home!

Of course, there was no way that I was going to sit this one out. My immediate superior, Sergeant Jennings, had assigned me the job of safely escorting the police psychologist to the Harbor Bridge. Those were the last orders I'd received and acknowledged.

I could almost hear myself explaining my actions later to my Academy instructors.

"I guess that I just never got the radio call, Sir."

I could already see their looks of disbelief.

A half-block from Melville and 34th, I pulled off the road and parked the police cruiser in an alley. I quickly ran the ensuing distance, and approached the corner with extreme caution.

What I saw made my blood run cold.

Three thugs were rocking the broken-down vehicle, a Mercedes with doctor's tags, nearly tipping it over. They were taunting the woman inside, who looked beside herself with fright.

One of the thugs got a car jack and began beating the vehicle: First the hood, then the roof, then the windshield. I saw a spider-web of delicate cracks instantly form. I could hear her panicked screams all the way across the street.

That did it. Officer Dick on the job! Uh, I don't think I much like the sound of **that**! Make that **Officer Grayson** on the job!

Not caring if they saw me anymore, I sprinted across the street, and before they could react, I went airborne!

I easily tucked my legs tightly under me, and cleared the vehicle's roof. As I flew over the doctor's Mercedes, I kicked out powerfully with both legs.

One of the men immediately went down, but he wasn't out. The other one that I'd aimed at ducked at the last minute and somehow managed to avoid the worst of the kick's force.

No matter.

I landed easily, on catlike feet, and without pausing, singled out the first man again and kicked straight up with my right leg; then in rapid succession, I repeated it at least three more times, each time connecting with his head--chin, cheek, temple.

As he began to collapse, I struck out, straight-armed at his solar plexus, with the heel of my right hand. The guy's eyes rolled behind his head and he went down.

Meanwhile, the other two weren't standing still.

As I concentrated on the first one, I almost abstractedly kept the other two at bay.

The second ugly grabbed me by the wrist while I was busy with the first guy, but I easily countered without breaking stride, and threw him at the third goon. As they recovered from a tangle of arms and legs, the first goofball finally succumbed to my gentle ministrations.

"Okay, gentlemen. Now it's **your** turn. How do you want it? One at a time or both at once?"

Listen to **me**! I thought. Put on a cop uniform and I start to talk the talk. A real Dirty Harry!

They looked at each other, then grinning viciously, they both came at me.

Brilliant play, Grayson. They looked like King Kong and Baby Kong. Brother! Were *they* big! As tall as Bruce and twice as wide. I took a deep calming breath, then assumed a fighting stance.

My kind of odds, I thought, grinning ferally.

I took out my police flashlight from where it hung on my belt. Why, you ask? Because, a policeman's flashlight is a thing of beauty to behold. It's made of medium-weight materials, weighing in at almost five pounds. This is one dangerous weapon in the right hands.

I gave the flashlight a practice twirl, to test its balance, as if it were one of my escrima sticks. It felt slightly heavy towards the front end. No problem. I'd learned another object lesson in the Batcave: Should I ever be stripped of any of my nifty bat-toys, use whatever's on hand!

As they rushed me, I threw the flashlight, butt-end first, straight at the guy on the left. It hit him smack between the eyes. His legs just folded under him. The last guy suddenly realized that it was just him and me now.

He stopped his rush, and then he, too, assumed a fighting stance and started circling me cautiously.

By this time, I could hear about a dozen sirens wailing in the distance. They were approaching rapidly.

"Give it up, buddy," I said reasonably. "You're gonna have half the BHPD here in about another five seconds. And they're coming in guns blazing! That's a police psychologist that you and your pals were terrorizing a few seconds ago."

The perp's eyes widened farther than I ever thought the human eye could. I nodded.

"That's right. She's a police officer. And just about now there're a lot of cops who are pretty mad at you and your buddies for trying to hurt one of our own. Come on. Give it up now. Nothing's worth your life!"

He shook his head.

"I can't," he said desperately. "I'm a three-time loser. They'll throw away the key and stick me in the hole this time. I've got a kid, man! I ain't never even seen him!"

"Come on, pal," I insisted. "Don't do this. I don't want to hurt you. Give it up. For your kid's sake, if not for yourself. Believe me, no kid wants to grow up without his father. I know what I'm talking about!"

"I'm sorry, kid, but I gotta take a cab. Understand, man . . . it ain't nothing personal. You've been straight up with me. But, I can't go back to the joint! My old lady won't let my boy visit me! She's turned him against me. My own son's ashamed of me, man!"

He flicked his wrist, and a small .22 caliber handgun materialized as if by magic. My trained eye automatically identified the make: an NAA Model 22S revolver. Small, but effective at such close range. The tension level ratcheted up about another ten points.

"Hey, come on, pal. You know what they'll do to you for threatening a police officer with a gun!"

I paused, then decided on a new tactic.

"Look, I can't keep calling you 'pal' or 'hey, you,'" I said conversationally. "Why don't you tell me your name?"

He looked at me suspiciously, eyes narrowed. I noticed that his gun hand was shaking. Not good.

"Look, why don't I introduce myself first? The name's Grayson, Dick Grayson. Well, my real name's Richard, but my friends call me Dick--"

"Dick, huh?" he interrupted, laughing. "Hey, man, that's funny. You have some real funny friends there!"

Okay, not the response I expected, but at least he was talking to me. It gets a little harder to shoot someone you're talking to. Damn! I've *gotta* get a new nickname!

"Uh, yeah, they're real jokers," I said shrugging my shoulders and giving him my best sheepish grin. "So, what's your name?"

"My friends call me Snake," he said distractedly.

"Snake, huh? Sounds like you have some real tough friends," I said agreeably.

By then the first of the patrol units arrived, lights flashing and tires screeching. The officers emerged from their cruisers at a run, taking up shooting stances behind the cars.

"Drop your weapon! Drop it or we'll fire!"

"Snake, listen to them," I pleaded quietly. "Give it up! This isn't worth your life! Snake, think of your son! If you're killed tonight, he'll never know that his father loved him! Is *this* how you want him to remember you? As a three-time loser who was killed in a gunfight with the police?"

I thought of the jumper at the Harbor Bridge. Was there any difference in the situation? There, a man was threatening to take his own life, and the lives of anyone who tried to stop him. Here, a man was threatening to take my life, and would probably lose his as a result.

Worse, somewhere there was a small boy who would never get a chance to know his father.

I could see the desperation flitting across his face. He moved closer to me, his gun pointed straight at my head.

"Don't shoot!" he called. "Don't shoot, or the Blueboy here gets it."

Great! Robin, the Boy Hostage, flies again! Well, it wasn't going to end this way. I'd survived the Joker, Two-Face, and most of Arkham's Finest! I wasn't going to be killed by some two-bit punk, called Snake, with an itty-bitty .22 caliber.

Even **if** I felt a little sorry for him.

"Drop your weapon! This is your last warning!"

Whoa! Last warning?

The BHPD must've deployed snipers. They were probably drawing a bead on Snake already. Okay, time to turn the tables and take down the perp.

I kept thinking about his little boy. Damn! Snake wasn't just another loser in my mind anymore. He was suddenly a human being with real feelings! I gave myself a mental headshake. My reverse psychology had worked in reverse all right--on me!

"Stay back!" Snake was near hysteria; he was going to pull that trigger in another instant if I didn't do something fast. He held it somewhat shakily, but kept it aimed at my head.

There's nothing worse than literally looking down the barrel of a loaded weapon. Even **if** it's a small one!

This gun was less than six inches away from my face! At this distance, it seemed as if I was staring down the barrel of a 155 howitzer! I swear, I could see the rounds in the cylinder. I swallowed and tried to calm my rapidly beating heart.

Now!

I went down fast, catching him off-guard; simultaneously, I swept my feet out in a scissors kick, knocking him off-balance. Snake tried to stay on his feet, and in the process got off a wild shot. I heard it ricochet about twenty feet out, in the direction of the parked police cruisers.

I instantly ducked and rolled, recovered and leaped straight up; spinning in mid-air, I kicked out as savagely as I could with all the force I could muster. I had to take him down now, or he was a dead man.

I knew that as soon as Snake fired his weapon, the police snipers had begun squeezing their triggers. They probably hadn't fired yet, due to my proximity to the target. But it was only a matter of time.

Snake's life could now be measured in mere seconds.

I suddenly saw my Mom and Dad falling to their deaths. I saw them lying, unmoving, in Center Ring. I saw a broken-hearted little boy being led away from the only people that he'd ever loved, from the only world that he'd ever known.

Feeling my loss as if it had only happened yesterday, I gathered every ounce of power I could, and I kicked out more brutally than I'd ever kicked before. It wasn't my life I was trying to save, but Snake's.

I couldn't save my own father's life; therefore, tonight I'd save the life of another little boy's father. One day, Snake would thank me for it. I hoped.

I struck his left temple with the outside edge of my right foot. Snake stumbled but he didn't go down. Damn! He had a hard head. I landed lightly on the balls of my feet, then executed a quick succession of circular arc kicks. First one to the solar plexus; as he doubled over, another to the chin; then to finish him off, a jumping roundhouse to the chest area.

Snake finally went down. I felt exhausted. Why did the big ones always seem to think that they were invulnerable? I sighed. I'd never been able to answer that one. I supposed that was a job for the police psychologist.

Speaking of which . . . I turned to her. She gave me a pleading look that seemed to ask if it was over. I nodded.

"It's over, ma'am," I said reassuringly between gasps. "You're safe now." Her tremulous smile was worth the whole night.

The BHPD moved in with guns drawn. They approached each of the perps cautiously, two arresting officers per goon. Soon all three were handcuffed, and still unconscious, were thrown into separate police cruisers.

"You did a helluva job there, Cadet Grayson," Lieutenant Mahoney, the officer in charge, said. "I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like . . . whatever you did in my entire twenty years on the force."

"Just doing what I was taught at the Academy, sir," I said guilelessly. Mahoney smiled, and shook my hand, then proceeded to chew my butt out.

"What you did was also incredibly *stupid*, Cadet!" Mahoney said, jabbing his finger at my badge. "You were *ordered* back to station! You *disobeyed* those orders! And don't give me any BS about not receiving the message! Consider yourself on report, Cadet. I'm recommending you for maximum disciplinary action!"

Mahoney gave me a cold, fierce glare for another second. I swallowed, feeling the same cold hand in the pit of my stomach that I did whenever Batman had grounded me for disobeying orders during a patrol.

I held Mahoney's stare as steadily as I could. He was right. I'd disobeyed orders. However, unlike those times as Robin when I'd done something dumb, like almost getting myself killed, this time I knew that what I did was what I had to do; given the same set of circumstances, I would do it again. Unfortunately, I broke my own rule: Don't call attention to yourself!

Maybe, this cop gig wasn't such a good idea after all, I thought for

the umpteenth time.

Mahoney's eyes softened momentarily.

"It was also an unbelievably brave thing to do, Cadet," he said quietly. "Welcome to the team."

I suddenly felt ten feet tall. Mahoney's stare hardened again.

"But you're **still** on report!" he added, then turned to the doctor.

"By the way, Doctor, Sergeant Jennings, the OIC at the Bridge, radioed earlier. They talked the jumper off the bridge, so they won't be needing your services after all."

Mahoney shook his head in wonderment.

"Seems he'd just broken up with his girlfriend, and he thought it was the end of the world. Can you believe that? The guy's twenty-four years old, has his whole life ahead of him, and wants to end it all, because he just broke up with his girlfriend. Sometimes, I just don't get it."

I recalled my own break-up with Kory and long estrangement from Bruce. I guess I could see how relationships, which seemed so clear-cut one day but suddenly turned murky the next, could result in a person believing he had nothing left to live for.

In an instant, the low points of my life flashed in my mind . . .

When I lost my parents, I thought it was the end of the world, but Bruce and Alfred were there for me and helped me through the worst of it. I guess I came out of it fairly whole. Then, Batman fired Robin and my world came crashing down around me again. This time I had Kory and the Titans to help me through, but it was touch and go there for awhile, especially after Bruce adopted Jason. But I managed to walk away from it. I survived.

Then, Kory left Earth and returned to Tamaran, and I was fired as the Titans' leader. But the "most unkindest cut of all"? Bruce asked someone else to replace him as Batman. This time, I had no one to lean on, no one to turn to. I only had myself. I guess I was pretty messed up there for a while: No self-confidence, feelings of abandonment and betrayal, and worse, feelings of self-blame and self-loathing.

If there was ever the perfect time for Dick Grayson to give up on life, that was it. But I didn't, I kept going. It wasn't easy. It took me a long time to climb back up, to accept myself as I am and not as someone else might want me to be. Somehow, I did it. Somehow, I survived.

Now, while there were still some unresolved issues between Kory and me, at least we were friends. I was Titans leader again. And, while things between Bruce and me were still far from perfect, they were certainly better.

Suicide? That just wasn't my style. I was a detective. I'd been trained since childhood to search for answers and never quit until I found them. Maybe I didn't have all the answers yet, but I was still looking. I hadn't given up.

I'd survived.

Mahoney shook his head again, showing his absolute mystification at human behavior.

"Doctor, will you be all right? I can get one of the units to drive you home. Oh, and we've called a tow truck to come for your car. If we leave it here overnight, there won't be anything left of it by morning."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Mahoney. I really appreciate that." She began to shake. "I was just sitting here, waiting when those three men suddenly showed up. I've driven through here countless times before. I-I work at a free clinic about five blocks up from here. I didn't think anything of it when I got the call."

Her shaking became even more noticeable. Her voice began to take on a frightened little girl quality. The tears finally came. Mahoney immediately took her in his arms.

"I don't know what happened," she said, her voice shaking. "My car just stopped running. I just had it in the shop yesterday. They replaced the fuel-injection cylinder. They said everything was all right."

At her words, I quickly popped the hood open and checked underneath. Sure enough, the fuel line had come loose. I showed Mahoney, who shook his head in disgust.

"Doctor, uh, what's your first name?" Mahoney asked.

"Lauren . . . Doctor Lauren Winters."

"Well, Lauren, I think that maybe we should take you to Bludhaven General for observation. I really don't think that you should be alone just now."

"No, please! I work there. I wouldn't feel comfortable being a patient in my own hospital. I could stay with my friend, Marianne. She's one of the residents at Bludhaven General. Please?"

Mahoney nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, Lauren. My partner and I'll drop you off, if that's all right with you."

Dr. Winters nodded. She looked ready to drop on her feet. It had been a long night for all of us. Before they left the scene, she turned to me and hugged me. Then she stood slightly on her tiptoes and kissed me on the cheek.

"That's for being the bravest man I've ever met in my life. Thank

you. You saved my life. And you saved his, too."

I looked at her stunned.

"How did you--?"

"--Discern your intentions?" she asked.

I nodded mutely.

"I'm a police psychologist, remember? Besides, I could hear your conversation. That was a wonderful thing you did."

I blushed.

Dr. Winters gave me a slightly impish smile. Her smile showed a glimpse of who she really was. Not the meek and frightened victim of a violent attack by three sociopathic losers, but a vivacious, intelligent woman who had the misfortune to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Thank you, Cadet Grayson. Stop by my office anytime you just want to talk to someone. I'm actually very good at what I do." She said this last with just a tinge of irony in her voice.

"I'll do that, Doctor Winters."

A half-hour later, I was back on patrol with Jennings and Kelp. I was once again riding in the backseat in my position as observer only.

Jennings was regaling me with the story of the "Harbor Bridge Jumper: News at Eleven!"

"So I says to him, 'Look, son, she dumped you! Okay? Get over it!'" Kelp and Jennings laughed at this.

"The kid looked like he'd soiled his pants! He looks at me really mad, y'know? 'What kind of bull *is* this? You're supposed to talk to me . . . be nice to me! I'm gonna jump! Don't you *get* it?'"

"Well, by now, I'm getting just a little perturbed myself. I mean, it's the first call of the night, and now we've been at it for almost two hours. Traffic's backed to beat all hell! The good citizens of Bludhaven, who are stuck on the bridge, are ready to push the guy over the railing. A few are even screaming at him to jump 'cause they're late for their supper."

Jennings shook his head in amazement, a mirror to Mahoney's earlier bewilderment at human behavior.

"People! Well, it's our job to serve and protect! So, here I am serving and protecting, and this little jerk starts quoting police protocol to me! That's it! I'm ready to kill 'im myself!"

Kelp laughed.

"That's when the Sarge here gets the brilliant idea to try reverse psychology on the kid." Kelp began to laugh helplessly, unable to continue the story.

"Hey, it worked didn't it?" Jennings asked.

"Yeah, 'cause his pants got caught on the railing," Kelp replied, still chuckling uncontrollably, barely able to get the words out.

Jennings smiled sheepishly.

"I ain't never claimed to be no suicide negotiator," he said.

"I'm sorry, Sarge," Kelp gasped. "It ain't funny, I know. But seeing that kid dangling from the bridge railing, literally by the seat of his pants . . . that's gotta be one for the books!"

Jennings and Kelp exchanged amused grins, their easy camaraderie almost palpable.

I looked curiously at the both of them.

"So what **did** you say to him?" I asked.

"That he'd be better off dead 'cause his girlfriend was probably screwing his best friend by now. So he should just go ahead and jump and let us all go home."

Jennings looked at me ruefully.

My face must've registered my shock. I mean the first rule of suicide negotiation was to **never** encourage the person to do it. Cynics figured that all the person wanted was attention, otherwise he'd kill himself in private, but that was far from true.

"We were taught at the Academy that if a person's **talking** about killing himself, then he's also been **thinking** about it," I said slowly.

Not to mention that it could result in a dead or severely injured victim, I added silently.

Heck, Batman had drilled it into me since I was a kid. Now, I'd just figured that it was something that **every**body in authority knew.

"Yeah, yeah, kid. I know. But, nothing else I was taught at the Academy ever proved useful. Who'da thought that on this **one** thing, the PAIs would be proven right?"

Jennings shook his head in self-disgust.

"I almost had a heart attack when the kid actually put his legs over the railing. I dropped the damn bullhorn and started running towards him. Man, I haven't run like that since high school football."

Jennings went quiet for a long moment. The enormity of his near fatal error seemed to envelope him.

"Like Kelp said, it was pure luck that we didn't lose him. There was something jagged sticking out of the railing and somehow his trousers got caught on it. Another few seconds, and he would've been fish bait, but me and Kelp here managed to grab him and drag him back to safety."

Jennings looked at me and grinning easily, he added with mock severity, "Anyway, let this be a lesson to you, Cadet! Listen, keep your mouth shut, and pay attention! You may *learn* something!"

At this moment, our call sign came over the air.

"Lincoln Oscar Five, a Code Seven in progress in the vicinity of one-two-three-three Riverside Drive. Lincoln Oscar Five, respond Code Five."

A Code Seven meant a burglary in progress, and Riverside Drive was Bludhaven's most exclusive shopping district. Kelp acknowledged the call.

"Lincoln Oscar Five, ETA three minutes, out!" He flipped on the emergency lights and siren.

Here we go again, I thought!

Yup, this night was proving to be very educational, after all!

The End

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End
file.